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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development of humor, the positive potential of young children's humor, and resources for harnessing the energy of humor. The literature on humor is dominated by two theoretical streams: psychoanalytic theory, which recognizes humor as a vehicle for expressing emotions, particularly unacceptable emotions; and cognitive theory, which suggests that humor occurs when there is a restructuring of a pattern of elements. Humor requires the same type of cognitive insight as does creative problem-solving. A theory of the development of humor formulated by Paul McGhee focuses on cognitive advances that enable a child to perceive and generate cognitive incongruities. The origins of humor can be traced to smiling and laughter, which appear during the first year of life. The humor of preschool children is connected to the total context of their language experience, and often involves distortions of, and challenges to, verbal and conversational conventions. Preschoolers' humor is more often exhibited in cooperative play and ongoing play relationships than in destructive or separate activities. Suggestions for nurturing humor in young children are offered. A reference list of 20 items is provided. (BC)

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THE HUMOR OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Paper presented at the National Association for
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INTRODUCTION

Like Janus, the ancient Roman god of portals, humor is frequently behavior on the threshold; the threshold of meanings and motivations, facing two directions simultaneously. Humor revels in incongruity (Bariaud, 1989): the reconciliation of first assumptions with unexpected endings, the outlandish with the ordinary, the absurd with the literal, the exaggerated with the existing, and the illogical with the reasonable. For children, as well as adults, humor can be based on visual or auditory cues. Although humorous events are appreciated alone, the full potential of humor is achieved when it is shared (Chapman, 1983).

Humor evolves through a social experience. It emerges as a form of play: language play, play with and on ideas, and play with social rules and relationships. Events that register as humorous dwell on areas of personal interest or concern, even as they violate components of social and cultural norms. An event's interpretation as humorous depends on timing: the order of presentation, the pace of delivery, and the ephemeral mood of the recipients. A "sense of playfulness" can be considered a prerequisite for the appreciation of humor and sometimes its initiation (McGhee, 1984).

A great deal of our knowledge about young children's humor has focused on their response to and understanding of selected adult

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examples of humor rather than on how young children introduce humor into their lives. Today, as we look at the developmental course of the cognitive and social components of humor, we will explore the positive potential of young children's humor and the resources available for harnessing its energy to foster development.

Theoretical Background

Two theoretical streams dominate the literature on humor: the psychoanalytic and the cognitive.

Psychoanalytic Theory

The psychoanalytic interpretation recognizes humor as a vehicle for emotional expression. Through the medium of humor unacceptable feelings, particularly those associated with sex and aggression, can be expressed, carefully disguised under a socially acceptable cover or facade (McGhee, 1979). This approach suggests that we find things humorous when the thematic content alludes to specific concerns or needs as they resurface throughout life. Anxiety and emotional tension building up around such issues as: dependence and autonomy, achievement and failure, superiority and inferiority, affiliation and isolation, freedom and control, can be safely released through the outlet of humor, thereby assisting the individual to cope with hidden personal feelings that do not find ready expression in other aspects of life. Adults require that the unacceptable emotional content be buried within what Freud referred to as the "joke work" (Freud, 1905). The degree of camouflage

required depends on the individual. However, it will greatly effect whether or not the joke or event will be considered humorous. It may not affect laughter. Laughter will vary with the social settings.

Cognitive Theory

The Gestalt tradition provides the foundation for discussing the cognitive and incongruous aspects of humor (McGee, 1979). In the Gestalt view, the meaning of a group of elements depends on the whole configuration or pattern. A change in a single part changes the meaning of the whole, as in an optical illusion. Humor occurs when there is a sudden restructuring or reinterpretation of the whole as a result of a change in expected meanings usually brought about by the punch line or of a comparison of the mental image with a known reality. A parallel process occurs in problem solving: Resolution through cognitive insight.

The combination of these two processes in a humorous event has a multiplying effect. Consider the following examples:

* Worried parents called their pediatrician.
"Doctor, we need to see you. Our baby swallowed a fountain pen."
"O.K., I can meet you at the emergency room. What are you doing in the meantime?"
"Using a pencil." (Shulz & Horibe, 1974 cited in Clarke Stewart, 1985, p. 325).

Notice the latent aggressive elements in this example. As you can see, the response to humor can occur on two levels, cognitive and emotional.

The pleasurable feeling associated with humor enhances self esteem as it acknowledges a sense of cognitive mastery and the satisfaction of dealing with emotions through personal and socially acceptable channels. Joint appreciation of humor can facilitate other social interactions, setting the stage for friendships and reinforcing a feeling of group cohesiveness.

Creativity

Humor draws from the same well as other forms of creativity or creative problem solving. One approach to understanding creativity has approximated the creative phenomenon by considering the process of divergent thinking or the ability to generate a great number of associations to ideas or events through a wide range of directions. Arthur Koestler (1964) suggests that creative problem solving in any field involves bringing together two domains of thought that had never before been related in any meaningful way. This cognitive insight points out a relationship that once specified appears obvious and appropriate. Humor also requires this type of cognitive insight. It appears when attention is shifted to aspects of a problem or situation not initially noticed creating a "momentary fusion between two incompatible frames of reference." Koestler (1964) calls this "bisociation." Humorous solutions can be distinguished by the self contained or "local logic" (Ziv, 1989)

that momentarily suspends reality. This type of incongruity humor is based on the ability to manipulate symbols at several levels simultaneously. Empirical investigations point to a significant relationship between humor and other forms of creativity in children and adults (McGhee, 1919). The ability to transform one's view of objects and actions and to generate divergent combinations is characteristic of even the earliest humor initiatives.

Developmental Theory

Paul E. McGhee (1984) has traced the development of humor creation and appreciation in children through four stages. Each stage capitalizes on cognitive advances that enable a child to perceive and to generate cognitive incongruities.

* Stage 1 involves Incongruous Actions Towards Objects. The first examples of this type of humor merge with pretend play, usually appearing around 24 months, as a child substitutes familiar objects to take the place of appropriate objects within an action scheme. The oft quoted example is a child combing her hair with a ruler. The smiling or laughter that accompanies this act signals playfulness. It is a "metacommunication" that enables another (adult or child) to recognize the behavior as humor or play not error.

* Stage 2 concerns Incongruous Labeling of Objects or Events. Following close on the heels of this early symbolic play/humor

border is the incongruous labeling of objects/events that becomes increasingly evident in the latter half of the second year. This humor of name changing expands in subtlety through the third year, as endless possibilities open up that can occur with actions but do not require an action accompaniment; e.g., calling a foot a nose or suggesting you could see with your chin. These hallmark events indicate that words as symbols are becoming separated from the specific objects that they represent. The ability to manipulate the relationship of words to objects, at will, demonstrates mastery over the word. This language play involves non-literal use of linguistic and conversational resources.

* State 3 Conceptual Incongruity appearing around 3 years of age marks a change in emphasis. At this point, a child recognizes classes of objects and events, and understands that things, animals, people and actions have several identifying features. Humor is generated when one of these characteristics is violated or changed. Words themselves can be recombined with humorous results. This stage predominates through the preschool years, until cognitive advances in logical abilities enables the child to more fully realize the ambiguity of language and by

* Stage 4 that words have Multiple Meanings. In Stage 4, major changes in the child's ability to monitor transitions, to reverse the sequence of events, to attend simultaneously to features of situations and relationships will enable her to replay alternative

meanings of key words or ideas. The restructuring reveals the incongruity and the humor that follows.

The Relationship of Smiling and Laughter to Humor

As we consider humor's beginnings, we find that smiling and laughter are the signals of humor. Smiling appears initially as part of the innate signaling system. Fleeting and internally provoked in the newborn, it is elicited reflexively by high pitch sounds at 3-4 weeks, and by a wide range of human and non-human stimuli through 3 months of age (Snow, 1989). An infants ability to smile in order to elicit a response by another around 3-4 months sets the foundation for an explosion in its use in communication. The smile of the infant has variously been considered as a recognition of a contingency pattern (Watson, 1976) the affective component of assimilation (Piaget, 1976) and an indication of moderately unexpected or incongruous events (Sroufe & Piccard, 1972).

Laughter appears initially in more physically rigorous situations than those that elicit smiling. The most effective means of "getting babies to laugh" through the first year includes jiggling and kissing the baby's stomach. Laughter may require progressively more vigorous elicitors for older infants. Thus, laughter is closely associated with rough and tumble play. There is an interesting shift in the timing of laughter from its elicitation by the physical play routine itself around 4-6 months when smiling is already socially instrumental, to an earlier

appearance in the behavior sequence in the last quarter of the first year. At this time, laughter occurs in anticipation of the play routine. Laughter moved to the beginning of this sequence invites a playful episode. In this way, it also takes on socially instrumental characteristics expanding the period of social interaction. Smiling and laughter indicate a mood of playful readiness in the infant. In order to keep baby smiling and laughing, care givers may create the type of exaggerated movement and nonsense sounds as a part of these early dialogues that preschoolers later "invent" in their humor. The social power of smiling and laughter to keep interesting things happening and important people close is learned within the intimacy of these earliest relationships when the adult is able to modulate the level of stimulation to match the infants individual rhythms. Over stimulation will lead to crying and turning away. Infants find some levels of social and physical engagement a sensory and emotional overload. Laughter may sit at the edge of this boundary. Later, laughter appears again voluntarily and involuntarily in socially ambiguous situations.

Throughout the preschool years, laughter continues to be associated with physical activity and excitement. A child's ability to manipulate and interpret both smiling and laughter within the social arena continues to develop during this period. The mistakes, injuries and awkwardness of others can evoke laughter in preschool children. It may be the emotional threatening and ambiguous nature of the stimulation as well as the discrepancy from

the expected that stimulates this laughter. It is only after the child herself masters a task, that mistakes by others will generate laughter. Whereas another child's putting on a hat backwards or even tripping can yield laughter in the 3 year old, a 7 year old child will laugh at preschool children's spontaneous errors in logic such as saying, "I don't want any meat. Just give me a hot dog." It is generally not until the elementary school years that children become competent in employing a joking facade that purposely covers or reveals aggressive elements of their humor (Bariaud, 1989). They may also be able to "cover their tracks" with the tag, "I was just joking."

Adults are frequently concerned about the potential undercurrent of cruelty in children's humor. Nevertheless, a recent observational study of humor in nursery school found that the majority of humorous episodes were neutral or positive in direction (Lounsbury & Pollio, 1984).

A young child may deliberately repeat a mistake in exaggerated form using clowning to draw attention to the behavior. By laughing at her own behavior, a child can take control of an event that would have left her a victim (Peller, 1954). The child whose actions are more frequently of this nature may be seeking to orchestrate laughter and generate the feelings of belonging that the shared laughter envelops. The achievement of turning a passive position where mishaps cause physical or social misfortune into an active role where others are wooed to respond can indicate a positive coping strategy. The nature of the groups reaction and

the extent to which clowning remains isolated from other social skills will determine its social utility for the child.

Behaviors that are exaggerated in clowning may also be incorporated into ritual play. Even such equivocal behaviors as falling down and getting up can be imitated by another child and repeated in alternating sequence. In this form the action accompanied by laughter plays with the nature of social dialogue.

Humor challenges conversational convention

Young children who are frequent play partners are likely to create ritual play out of common events (both non-verbal and verbal). Preschool children recognize humor in the violation of the rules of questioning. The following is a spontaneous exercise that produced squalls of laughter in two almost 5 year olds (Garvey, 1977):

Boy (4:11)	**Girl (5:00)**
1. Do you know what?	2. What?
	3. What?
4. You're a nut.	5. What? What? (Squeals of laughter), (p. 93).

Notice the rhyming, as well as the quasi insulting natures of the "mis-labeling." Young children begin to practice this question and answer format through incongruous labeling humor , as is illustrated by the following conversation between a mother and a 26

month old, (Dunn and Kendrick cited in Cook-Gumpers, 1991):

c: I'm a pudding

M: Are you a pudding? and who is Robert?

c: Robert is a pudding too. He's a baby pudding (p. 218).

This mislabeling emphasises the importance of the intrafamiliar role. Judy Dunn (cited in Cook-Gumpers, 1991, p. 214) provides an example of play around gender labels and self labels associated with a good-naughty self identity.

Girl 2 years old:

c: Teddy's a man.

F: What are you?

c: You're a boy.

F: Yeah. what are you?

c: A menace.

F: Yeah a menace. Apart from that are you a boy or a girl?

c: Boy (laughs)

F: Are you? What's Trevor?

c: A girl (laughs)

f: You're silly (p. 214)

Older siblings, relatives, and friends may introduce the younger child to riddles. Asking the riddle question may appear as part of a repertoire years before the child is able to understand the multiple word meanings required for the solution. This fact will not stop most children from providing an alternative answer

complete with the required laughter.

The creation of humor requires taking social risks. A young child's foray into transformations of meaning through pretend play and humor may be ignored or viewed as incorrect responses, even when smiling or laughter are used to label the non-literal meaning. When an adult initiates incongruous labeling and other forms of humor, smiling/laughter or verbal markers like "silly or funny" may be particularly important with toddlers who may be uncertain about the meaning of the action or label if they have not instigated the humor transformation themselves.

Preschool children enjoy humor that challenges reality as they know it. Along with mislabeling parts of the body, they enjoy animals exhibiting mixed up characteristics or one animal making sounds of another animal, objects falling from the sky and people acting in ways that are in contrast with the usual order of daily family experiences. They particularly enjoy those family based contrasts that present adults (who are generally the source of order and power) beset with unexpected difficulties. A three year old may find a person wearing food as a hat, or a father wearing an infant's bonnet or people sitting on the ceiling stimulus for laughter. These are incongruous transformations that violate social realities, however, they are also rooted in strong perceptual images, as pictures or mental representations.

Nonsense sounds are humorous during the preschool years:

* humans creating mechanical sounds such as bouncing "boinging" or

squeaking; * unexpected ways of speaking like trying to talk through closed lips or in an exaggerated high pitched or low and gruff play voices; * made up sounds and words like vorp, squidzel, and pooperdooper.

The satisfaction of this humor appears to come from variations on the physical properties of the sounds, as well as the words themselves. Nonsense sounds and words may be intermingled. Sometimes children spontaneously slip into homonyms. Play with the shapes of words can appear first as mistakes that are "caught" by the child, recognized as humorous, repeated as a basis for elaborations. Verbal skills such as rhyming may appear first in language play and humor, as in the following spontaneous rhyming observed by Garvey (1977, p. 69) in the play of a 5 year old:

"mother smear, mother near, mother tear, mother dear"

or the following overheard in a preschool classroom (Pritcher & Schulz, 1983, p. 59):

"me ear, see ear, key car, pee car."

The second rhyme offers a double inducement for preschool laughter in its slightly scatological nature. Preschool humor is peppered with bathroom words and sounds. It makes one wonder at the real origins of the now commercialized A. A. Milne character, "Winnie the Pooh."

Many children at this age are either attempting bowl and bladder control or have just mastered these requests. Accidents in this area are common. Reminders of the when, where and even how of

toileting within the home indicate that it is still an area surrounded by many control issues. The fact that adults may find the use of bathroom euphemisms and "baby talk" unacceptable in other social contexts pinpoint this as a fertile area for the humorous violation of social rules.

The 5 year old elders of the preschool environment carry incongruent labeling humor into the realm of fantastical names. Illustrative of this is a monologue of a 5 year old girl in the form of a letter recorded by Garvey (1977).

> "Dear Uncle Poop"
> I would like you to give me a roasted meatball, some chicken pox and some tools. Signed Mrs. Fingernail (p. 71).

Although the humor of preschool boys more frequently includes bathroom and taboo language, girls will also tap this vein for humorous material, as do these two 5 year old girls using the telephone to call friends (Garvey, 1977).

1) Mommy, mommy, I got new friends called Dool, Sol, Ta.

2) Dool, Sue and Ta.

1) Those are funny names, aren't they?

2) No, its Poopoo, Daigi and Dia-Diarrhea (p. 71).

The spontaneous humor of a 6 year old whose mother is pregnant illustrates the ability of young children to create stories rich with incongruities.

> "Once there was a little girl. A lady and she had three hundred children in one year. And they all went to school and they all had the same group and they were all the same age. They all did the same things in school. Wasn't that sil-lee? They all had dirty faces. They all had pimples on their lips. And they all had the same age. They all had dresses on too, Hee, Hee, Hee. Then they all said the same thing at the same time. And they all sang. The only song they knew was: Abbadabbadabba . . . Their names were Jimmy and Mary and Cocky (she laughs) and Ellen and Frances and Jonathan. Timmy and Bimmy and Kisser. The End." (Wolfenstein, 1954 p. 191)

Exaggeration, distortion of sound and taboo words are combined to suggest loss of adult control and a general devaluation of babies. The satisfaction derived from using exaggeration can be heard in the bravado of the preschool population (Pritcher and Schultz, 1983).

Boy tells girl, "My friend's car goes any kind of speed."
Girl answers, "mine can go twenty one seventeen thousands."

(Girl to boy: "I'm bigger, bigger, bigger, your little, little, little."
Girl: "I'm bigger than little people; I'm stronger than other people."
To which boy responds: "I'm the biggest" (p. 83).

The intention in such instances is not generally to elicit laughter.

Preschoolers are interested in size comparisons. Height or size is a source of strength and an indicator of age, hence authority. They have a sense that the amount or number of things is a very important measure of desirability and also damage. This appears in the following dialogue (Pritcher & Schultz, 1983):

1st boy: "One spider will scare you."

2nd boy: "No it can't."

1st boy: I'm higher than your father. I'll get 3 or 4 spiders and they'll throw it in your mouth. I'll get mad and throw it in your face."

2nd boy: "I like spiders" (p. 53).

This demonstrates how closely the humor of young children is connected to the total context of their language experience. Young children consider the quantifiable aspects of damage in evaluating wrong doing. Actions resulting in a big mess or producing great destruction are considered more worthy of punishment than those in which the damage appears to be trivial, regardless of the intentions of the perpetrator. Stories where others, not themselves, are placed in these compromised positions are sources of merriment.

Contrary to the notion that humor during the preschool years is destructive, primarily serving to separate children, the evidence suggests that it is more often exhibited during cooperative play and in ongoing play relationships (Carson et al.,

1986). Rough and tumble play has similarly made adults uneasy. However, young children who engage in either of these forms of play with each other tend to stay together, engaging in role reversals and mutual imitation. Both humor and rough and tumble play require skill in interpreting the play signals of laughing and smiling that indicate that the events should be considered in the "as-if" mode. Rejected children have been found to have particular difficulties in this area. In the case of rough and tumble play, the problems may derive from intrafamilial play patterns characterized by cycles of overstimulation and withdrawal (MacDonald, 1987). Popular children, on the other hand, generally experience positive affect in play relationships with parents (MacDonald, 1987). Temperamental differences in children may be an intervening variable.

The temperament dimensions of activity and a positive approach to new events have been found to facilitate the social experiences of shared humor (Carson et al., 1986). Even in the preschool years, children who initiate humor are popular among their peers. Communicative competence in young children is closely linked to both the construction of humor and the sensitivity to humor production in others (Carson et al., 1986).

Children generally laugh at their own motor and verbal humor initiatives (Lounsbury & Pollio, 1984). This laughter can be contagious. Teachers and researchers have noted that the presence of a companion will be a catalyst for young children's laughter.

Cultures differ in the relationships that encourage the

exchange of humor (Alford, 1981). Sometimes humorous banter is even required (Alford, 1981). Radcliffe-Brown describes these joking relationships as encouraging and confining "privileged disrespect" (cited in Alford, 1981). Joking relationships between parents and children are frequent in the United States but they are rare cross-culturally (Alford, 1981). In the social experiments surrounding humor, the young child is also learning the rules of specific language contexts and their relationship to social roles. They are, in fact, learning which relationships allow the expression of humor.

Conclusion

Humor develops as a social skill. It creates intimacy and releases tension sometimes even deflecting anger. Humor exercises cognitive and language skills through the understanding and manipulation of symbols. It can draw attention to the seemingly unimportant aspects of life, and it can fuel creativity.

Given all of these benefits, how can a sense of humor be nurtured in young children? Here are some suggestions:

1. Create an atmosphere that makes room for humor by introducing it into home, classroom or child care center. It can be as brief as sharing special silly words or pointing out amusing pictures and incidents: or as lengthy as reading humorous stories to children and playing music with humorous themes.

2. Recognize children's examples of humor in group settings as positive contributions even if you do not think they are funny.

Share these social events with parents pointing out their positive contribution to the group.

3. Guide children with models of humor that is inclusive, and that does not target someone for ridicule.

4. Provide props that allow children to explore some of the social roles that have institutionalized humor such as the circus clown, or the court jester. A circus theme provides many other roles such as acrobats, jugglers, and animals with humor potential. These roles provide room for the display of humor based on the visual appeal to children of questionable motor coordination and the creation of mess and (organized) confusion.

5. Encourage humorous expression in art. Suggest possibilities for non-commercialized fantasy figures, or silly characters. Craft projects can evolve from children's stories with similar themes.

6. Use transition times for word play, nonsense rhymes and songs, or incongruous labeling games. Old familiar songs, even lullabies, can be distorted for their humorous effect. Example: Rock a bye baby on the tree top, when the wind blows the cradle will "gallop."

7. Consider projects with distorting mirrors or lenses

and finally

8. LOOK around you to rediscover your own sense of the incongrous and the absurd.

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